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ABSTRACT

A survey of 135 Pennsylvania regular classroom teachers (kindergarten through grade 8) examined their understanding of learning disabilities (LD) and the degree to which they felt prepared to work with LD students. The survey sought information on: (1) teacher preparation, knowledge, and experience related to identifying and working with LD students; (2) teacher knowledge of characteristics of LD students; and (3) teacher definition and concept of LD. Thirty-six percent of the respondents had received preservice training and 43 percent had attended an inservice workshop dealing with LD. However, 82 percent of the teachers reported that they had identified or referred a child as LD, but only 21% felt they sufficiently understood the concept to approximately identify and serve LD children. Teachers identified the five same LD characteristics most frequently--attention deficits, perceptual disorders, reading difficulties, oral language problems and motor problems. Teachers also frequently cited performance discrepancy and low frustration tolerance as LD characteristics. Results indicate that there is considerable confusion about learning disabilities among teachers who are being asked to identify, refer, and serve children who have learning problems. (CB)

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Teachers' Understanding of Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

The results of a survey of 135 regular classroom teachers are discussed in the following article. The intent of the survey was to obtain information regarding teachers' understanding of learning disabilities and the degree to which they feel prepared to work with students with learning disabilities. Specifically, questions focused on their preservice and inservice preparation, the extent of their involvement in the identification, referral, and program planning stages of service provision, and the definition and characteristics of learning disabilities as each teacher understands the concept. The study raised questions about the extent of teachers' knowledge of learning disabilities and has implications as to the preservice preparation of teachers; the kind, quality, and amount of supportive services and on-going educational training provided for inservice teachers; the process and purpose of the referral, assessment, and service provision system used in most schools; and the working relationship between regular and special educators within schools.

Teachers' Understanding of Learning Disabilities

In the words of Kirk and Chalfant (1984), "Learning disabilities has become an accept te'm that encompasses many kinds of problems not included in traditional categories of exceptionalities" (p. 3). Despite the acceptance of the term, however, its precise definition has long been a controversy, a controversy fueled by the heterogeneity of the LD population itself and of the professional groups concerned with that population. Two definitions commonly cited in current texts on LD are that of Public Law 94-142 and that proposed by the National Joint Committee of Learning Disabilities. These definitions read as follows:

> "Specific learning disabilities" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. (Federal Register, 1977)
>
> Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. (Hammill, Leigh, McNutt, & Larsen, 1981, p. 336)

Both definitions also contain a clause excluding learning problems which are primarily the result of other handicapping conditions. Useful additional criteria for the identificatation of children with learning disabilties are provided by Kirk and Gallagher (1983):

> A learning disability is a psychological or neurological impediment to spoken or written language or perceptual, cognitive, or motor behavior. The impediment (1) is manifested by discrepancies among specific behaviors

and achievement, or between evidenced ability and academic achievement; (and) (2) is of such a nature and extent that the child does not learn by the instructional methods and materials appropriate for the majority of children and requires specialized procedures for development...(p. 368)

Mercer, Forgnone, and Wolking (1976) reported variations in the definition of LD used by 42 states' departments of education, and cited this as underscoring the generic nature of the term. They observed that these states listed descriptive criteria used in the identification of children with learning disabilities but had not operationalized the definition to provide explicit criteria. The National Task Force Report (Chalfant, 1985) revealed that differences in definition continue among states, with most using the federal definition as contained in PL 94-142 or with modifications. One state was reported to have supplemented the federal definition with that of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, while 11 states wrote their own definition.

Operationalization of the definition is a laudable goal, but raises the problem of what definition is to be operationalized and how. Berk's (1983) analysis of LD definitions by experts in the field and as contained in federal legislation suggested the presence of "global concepts" which make difficult the task of consistently operationalizing the definition to provide clear criteria for identification. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Epps (1983) used 17 different sets of criteria (based on the general ideas of ability-achievement discrepancy, academic-achievement deficit, and scatter analysis of test scores) to examine the practice of classifying students as LD. When these criteria were applied to 248 students in the 3rd, 5th, and 12th grades who were considered "normal" by their schools, 85% were found to meet at least one of the 17 operationalizations. Furthermore, when using these operationalizations to compare 50 LD students to 49 unclassified low achieving students, 88% of the low achieving students met at least one of the 17 sets of

criteria, while 4% of those who were identified by the school as LD met none of the criteria (cf. Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983).

Clearly, experts have a problem defining LD and, consequently, in identifying students who qualify for special education services. Since, in most cases, regular classroom teachers are the first to recognize academic difficulties in their students and to initiate referrals for evaluation, and since these same teachers may be providing instruction to mainstreamed LD students, it is essential that these teachers be informed as to the nature and characteristics of learning disabilities. However, one often hears teachers misusing the term "learning disability" either in reference to a student who is not performing up to a teacher's expectation, or as justification for a weakness in their own behavior. Therefore, the present study was undertaken as an examination of the conception of LD among teachers themselves (i.e., their definition and characterization of LD), how prepared they feel to deal with this population, and the degree to which they are actually involved in the identification and planning process.

Procedure

Data were gathered through survey forms distributed in 15 Pennsylvania schools. Contact persons in each school (alumni, student teachers, or graduate students from this university) were charged with distributing these forms to all full time teachers in their school, as well as with gathering and returning the forms for analysis. While not providing a completely random selection of schools, this procedure did allow for a cross section of teachers from school districts scattered throughout rural, suburban, and urban localities in central and southeastern Pennsylvania.

A total of 135 completed surveys were returned from regular class teachers from kindergarten through eighth grade. Fourteen teachers had been teaching for five years or less; 33 had been teaching for six to ten years; 31 had been teaching

eleven to fifteen years; and 57 had been teaching for over fifteen years.

The survey instrument first asked the teachers to respond (yes/no) to six questions, their responses being tallied to determine the percent answering affirmatively. The six questions were:

(1) Have you ever taken a college-credit course dealing specifically with LD?

(2) Have you attended any inservice workshops dealing with LD?

(3) Are you familiar with the federal definition of LD as specified in Public Law 94-142?

(4) Have you ever identified or referred a child suspected of having a learning disability?

(5) In what ways were you involved in the subsequent evaluation of that child and in the preparation of the child's Individual Educational Plan?

(6) Do you feel you have sufficient understanding of LD to appropriately identify and serve children with learning disabilities?

Respondents were then asked to write their definition of learning disabilities and to list five observable characteristics of LD. Responses to these questions were evaluated using criteria derived from Kirk and Gallagher (1983) and the definitions of PL 94-142 and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. Specifically, syrveys were examined to ascertain whether or not each of the following targeted characteristics was included in the teachers' responses: (a) attribution of the problem to a neurological or psychological process dsyfunction; (b) exclusion of other handicaps as the primary reason for the learning difficulty; (c) discrepancy (between potential and achievement, between age/grade expectations and achievement, or between achievement levels in different academic sreas) and the necessity for special intervention beyond what is provided in the regular classroom; and (d) ways in which the disability is manifested. Manifestation was further broken down for descriptive analysis by using the dichotomy proposed by Kirk and Chalfant (1984)

in which learning disabilities are viewed as being either academic--including reading, spelling, handwriting, written expression, and arithmetic--or developmental --encompassing attention deficits (distractibilty, impulsivity, hyperactivity, short attention span, etc.), problems with memory, perceptual disorders, motor problems, disorders in thinking (conceptualization, abstraction, problem solving), and oral language disorders. In addition, because of the increased attention being given in recent years to the psychosocial aspects of learning disabilities (e.g., Bryan, 1986; Center & Wascom, 1986; Kronick, 1981; Smith, 1983; Wilchesky & Reynolds, 1986), also tabulated were responses indicating poor self-concept, lack of social skills (e.g., social misperception), low frustration tolerance, disturbances in emotionality (e.g., emotional lability or inappropriate responses), and behavior problems. The percentage of teachers including each of the targeted responses in their listing of characteristics and in their definition of LD was calculated and ranked for purposes of discussion.

Results

Thirty-six percent of the teachers reported having taken a college course on LD and a total of 43% indicated having attended an inservice workshop dealing with LD. Only 27%, however, expressed familiarity with the federal definition. While only 21% felt they sufficiently understood LD to appropriately identify and serve these children, 82% reported that they have identified or referred a child suspected of being LD. Forty-five percent indicated involvement in the subsequent evaluation of the referred child, but only 12% were involved in the IEP preparation. Many indicated the extent of their involvement to be referral only. Some stated that they supplied information regarding a student's classroom performance, recorded observations, completed skills checklists, and reviewed test data, and a few indicated having met with parents, school psychologists, and counselors to help identify areas of need or to decide which subjects a child could handle in the

regular classroom. Many teacher responses, however, seemed to carry a negative tone, saying only that they "sat in" on a conference, having opportunity for little or no input. As one teacher commented, "The school psychologist usually has a meeting with the principal and me to explain his findings. Sometimes I am encouraged to express my opinion, but that doesn't mean it will have any real bearing on the case." Another teacher stated that the student had simply been "assigned" to him. Such comments suggest that these teachers felt they were viewed as unimportant to the educational planning process. They at least communicate dissatisfaction with the role that has been assigned to the teacher in this process.

The major ingredient of the teachers' definitions of LD was the principle of a discrepancy in achievement and the need for special education (46% of the teachers). This was followed in frequency (33%) by a referral simply to a general problem in learning. Some of these were an attempt to define a condition ("disorders that handicap a person's ability to learn"); others focused on the individual ("those students who are of average or above intelligence but who have some weakness in learning"); still others focused on curricula ("any area of academics in which the student functions at an abnormal level"), Most of these general statements reflected a circular reasoning and limited depth of understanding, as in "learning disability is a child having problems with learning."

Involvement of the central nervous system was recognized in the definitions of 20% of the teachers. Only 4% referred to the exclusion of other handicapping conditions as the primary cause of the disability. On the other hand, 14% erred in defining LD by stating that it is the result of physical, emotional, mental, social, or sensory problems. A few teachers defined LD as immature or defective speech, and one reffered to unspecified "outside" factors as causing LD. The most remarkable definitions of LD were "Any person who has extreme difficulty relating

to the environment; e.g., people in prison have a learning disability in relating to society;" and, "body and mind not functioning at the same rate of speed." Fifteen teachers (11%) gave no definition at all.

The most frequently identified characteristics of LD (in decreasing order) were attention deficits, perceptual disorders, reading difficulties, problems in oral language, and motor problems. In general, except for reading problems, developmental learning disabilities were cited at a higher frequency than were academic learning disabilities. Since reading is the most common academic area to be affected by a learning disability, it was not unexpected to find it high on the teachers' lists. Memory problems and handwriting were next highest in frequency, followed by thinking, spelling, written expression, and arithmetic which were mentioned by only a small percentage of teachers. Of the psychosocial problems, 13% of the teachers cited low frustration tolerance and behavior problems as characteristic of LD. Lack of social skills and poor self-concept were mentioned by only 4% and 3% of the teachers, respectively.

Some characteristics suggested by the teachers could not be classed into the targeted features: inconsistency of performance, poor work habits, lack of motivation or interest, and stress. That the concept of LD is not well understood by many teachers seemed apparent by the suggested characteristics which are in error: speech defects; physical, sensory, emotional, or mental impairments; autism; diseases; and low intelligence. Most unusual responsed included the listing of "tears," "observable twitches," and "physical features such as Down's Syndrome." Thirteen teachers (9.6%) listed no characteristics at all.

Discussion and Implications

Our study shows weaknesses in the teachers' understanding of learning disabilities and has implications as to the preservice preparation of teachers; the kind, quality, and amount of supportive services and on-going educational training provided

for inservice teachers; and the process and purpose of the referral, assessment, amd service provison system used in most schools. Further implications can be made as to the working relationship between the special and regular educators within schools.

A major result of this survey is confirmation of the confusion surrounding the definition of LD among the same teachers who are being asked to identify, refer, and serve children with learning disabilities. Although limited to teachers from one state, given the definitional controvery that exists among the "experts," there is little reason to assume that similar results would not be obtained nationwide. In part, this may be attributable to the heterogeneity of the LD population, the "generic" nature of LD (Hammill et al., 1981). Successful implementation of PL 94-142, in terms of both due process and the need to provide the most appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, requires teachers who are knowledgeable and able to meet the needs of exceptional learners. Preservice and inservice courses and workshops are the normal vehicle for helping classroom teachers to develop their skills and to adjust their attitude toward teaching children who have learning differences, but this survey suggests that the number of teachers partaking of such programs is low (less that half of these respondents). Whether this is because teachers are not inclined or encouraged to elect such programs, or because the schools are not offering such programs needs to be determined and appropriate steps to alter this situation must be taken. Furthermore, the efficiency of an inservice workshop to provide sufficient training to teachers towards identifying and serving LD children is questionable--even given serious professional involvement and emotional investment on the part of the teachers--since these workshops are usually provided on a one-shot basis and are isolated from "real" students and situations. At the very least, as Siantz and Moore (1978, p. 27) have observed:

(Workshop) training must address, over time and in depth, the knowledge and

skills needed to teach children with a specific disability in a subject area, in terms of: decisions about assessment procedures, skills, roles, objectives, and materials; effective communication and cooperative planning with others, including professionals, parents, and students.

If the teachers themselves do not request such training from the schools, perhaps groups such as the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities, as advocates for LD students, could pressure the schools to more adequately prepare their teachers along these lines. Perhaps with this kind of support and training, regular teachers called upon to work with mainstreamed youngsters would not feel as though LD students are being dumped into their lap, as many of the teachers in our survey seemed to feel. Preservice programs preparing elementary and secondary education teachers also need to provide more direct training related to identifying and serving handicapped students in the regular classroom. Perhaps requiring all education majors to complete coursework or to demonstrate competencies in areas related to special education in order to obtain teacher certification, as some states now do (Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers, 1980; Phipps, 1984), will alter this situation.

Presently, there is great concern that the lack of an adequately operationalized definition of LD and explicit criteria to enable discrimination of LD from non-LD students has led to a watering down of the concept and of programs. Cruickshank (1985) challanged professionals in the field to adopt a more accurate definition of LD and to recognize the distinction between children with intrinsically caused learning disabilities and those whose learning problems are environmentally related. The confusion and intermingling of LD students and students with learning problems has the effect of diluting, reducing, or denying provision of appropriate services to those who truly need special services (Division for Learning Disabilities, 1986). The present study reinforces the need to clarify the definition and criteria for

identifying learning disabilities called for by others (e.g., Berk, 1983; Wilson, 1985).

The fact that 82% of the teachers in our survey have identified and referred children suspected as being LD while only 21% felt they sufficiently understood the concept to appropriately identify and serve the children raises a concern as to the basis on which teachers are making referrals for evaluation. Many of the suggested definitions failed to distinguish the LD population as a group separate from those with physical, sensory, and intellectual handicaps, or were extremely vague in content. Furthermore, the characteristics cited may be equally true of non-LD students (cf. Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983). There is a danger that teachers may view referral as the line of least resistance and first option, whereby referring a child for testing and special education placement becomes a means of avoiding or denying responsibility and shifting the burden of teaching to the special educator. If such is the case, the LD may become a "dumping ground" for students who are not showing the desired response to teaching. A follow-up to this survey would be to question the criteria teachers use to refer students for testing and to determine what their expectations are as to the outcome of the referral/testing process. Even if we assume that a referral represents an honest quest for assistance in knowing "what to do" for a particular student, the procedure seems to have an unwritten premise that the referred child <u>does</u> have a disability and, under the presumption that something is wrong with the student, "tests are administered until the professionals are able to identify some pathology, <u>which they nearly always can</u>" (Ysseldyke & Alsozzine, 1982, p. 128, emphasis added). A teacher's perception of a student seems to have more impact in decision making than objective test data: A student experiencing difficulty in the classroom is preseumed to be learning disabled at the time the referral is made. Tests are used more to support or justify this conclusion than for purposes of establishing educational needs and objectives (Ysseldyke,

Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982).

Our findings lend agreement to Graden, Casey, and Christenson's (1985) contention that current practices, from referral through program planning, are inconsistent and problematic. Regular class teachers need to be informed as to prereferral strategies, including instructional adaptations that can be made in the classroom. A prereferral intervention systen based on a consultation model and designed to provide assistance to classroom teachers, to eliminate unnecessary referrals, and to reduce inappropriate placement in special education addresses this issue (Graden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985; Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985). The National Task Force report (Chalfant, 1985) indicated that 16 states employ some sort of "building-based teacher support teams" which allow for a sharing of ideas, knowledge, and expertise in dealing with students' with learning and behavior problems. Our study supports the need for such programs in all schools.

These survey results also raise a question about assessment and programming procedures. Less than half of the respondents reported being even minimally involved in the assessment process, with only 12% indicating even limited involvement in the preparation of the students' IEPs. Comments made by respondents implied that the school psychologist often brought to staffings a statement of goals and objectives for the students. These findings are not in accord with the procedures outlined in PL 94-142 requiring inclusion of the child's regular teacher in a multidisciplinary team evaluation and in the development of the IEP. Rather, our findings confirm the conclusion of Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Allen (1981) that regular teachers are present at team meetings, but participate little. We can only theorize as to why the classroom teachers are not more involved in these processes, but in pondering the issue some disturbing questions are raised concerning the relationship between the special and regular educators: Do those in special education make the classroom teachers feel unwanted, or that they have nothing of

value to contribute? Do we purposely or unwittingly communicate a lack of respect for their professional status and fail to recognize and capitalize on their teaching competencies and experience? Are special educators failing to serve as resource persons and to maintain a collaborative relationship with their counterparts in the regular classroom? Even worse, are special educators assuming a competitive role, unwilling to share their knowledge and skill while at the same time learning from the regular class teacher? What is the effect of these teachers' limited involvement? Since their participation beyond the initiation of the referral is minimal, we wonder whether these teachers are as committed to the mainstreaming of LD students as would be desired. Does the procedure as it is worked out in individual schools encourage or reinforce the idea of removing from classroom teachers any responsibility for the education and development of the student referred and identified as LD? Again, we are led to inquire whether school districts are providing sufficient (or any) training or assistance to the regular class teachers to help develop their skills in working with students with learning differences. Furthermore, are teacher training institutions and school districts providing special educators with the necessary training to enable them to fulfill their role as resource and supportive persons for the classroom teachers? These questions raise issues that must be addressed if an appropriate education is to be provided to students with learning disabilities.

Thurlow, Ysseldyke, and Casey (1984) suggested that the focus in education be redirected toward instruction rather than classification. Perhaps the emphasis on recognizing learning disabilities overly focuses on the negative. A more positive approach--one in which regular and special educators can function more cooperatively --would be to recognize learning differences. Preservice and inservice training could be designed to provide all teachers with the competencies needed to tailor instruction to the learning styles and abilities of their students, Referral would then only be necessary when the teacher required more indepth assessment than s/he

is capable of doing in the classroom in order to more adequately understand the learning abilities of a student and to adapt instruction accordingly. Conceivably, this kind of support would encourage a more cooperative relationship among regular and special education professionals as they work together toward the common goal of educating all of America's youth.

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